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Editorial



Pop-ups are the great stealer of productivity.

I'm not talking about pop-ups that compel you to "click here, you are this site's one-millionth visitor!!!" or "Spyware has been detected on your computer. Click here to fix the problem." Clicking

on these types of pop-ups can steal more than just your productivity...

What I am talking about are the various user-invited pop-up windows, sometimes called "toast" for the way they pop the bottom of your desktop, announcing every new piece of email, every instant messenger contact that signs on, annoying special offers from even reputable software vendors that you may have opted in for.

In this age of digital connectivity, friends, family and coworkers are only a click away. That's both a good and bad thing.

Most anyone that carries a cell phone or BlackBerry-style device has joked about it being a digital leash, whether to home or to the office. However, suggest getting rid of the phone or PDA and they are likely to look at you as though you've finally lost it for good.

The instant online connection to people we need to speak to is similar. While we may complain about the constant interruptions that come as a result of being available anytime and pretty much any place at the click of a button, the thought of taking a step back and unwiring ourselves is almost incomprehensible.

So how does the average consumer deal with information and connection overload?

Some experts suggest turning off the digital toaster. That is to say, disabling the constant popups that, whether they command your full attention or not, can't help but distract you. The little snippet of text can be so enticing, leading us to drop whatever we're doing and click through to see the rest of the message.

Everyone has his or her own computing habits. I recently tried to change mine. I have turned off all but essential notifications, much to the chagrin of some coworkers who are used to an instant email response. Usually, the same ones who pop their head through the door and say "did you get that email I just sent?" thus defeating the purpose of email. I disabled all IM notifications, save those for an incoming message; people seem generally to respect a person's IM status it seems, and the novelty of instant text communication is gone such that messages are rarely consist of just a simple "hey" anymore, unless it's a preface for something a little more important.

The key to making technology work for you, as opposed to feeling like you work for it, is to examine how you work. Do you really need to be instantly accessible at a moment's notice? Can checking your inbox be confined to a half-hour in the morning, a half-hour after lunch and with a final check before heading home in the evening?

It's amazing how much more you can get accomplished when you make technology work for you instead of answering its siren song every time it beckons.

Let us know how you cope with information and connection overload. Andrew@ppublishing.ca... just don't expect and instant response.

Enjoy the issue,

Andrew Moore-Crispin
Editor-in-Chief

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Digital Photography Tutorial: Shooting in the Raw

Some cameras can save images in an advanced format called Camera Raw. Raw files are often called digital negatives and are clearly superior to JPEG or TIFF image formats in many ways, but they are also less friendly to deal with.

When a digital camera creates a JPEG image, a few things happen within the camera. The camera's built-in image processor assembles a raw image from the sensor points. It then applies the camera settings for colour balance, exposure sharpness, and so on. Using the settings for image size and compression level, the camera will resample the image and apply a compression algorithm, saving the processed file in a JPEG image format.

JPEG files use a form of data compression called lossy, which means that image information is discarded in the process. Once the camera saves the JPEG image, any unused data is gone for good. That's not as disastrous as it might sound because JPEG compression is very sophisticated and this trade-off between image fidelity and file size is usually more than acceptable, especially at high quality settings.

There's a parallel situation with MP3 music. The quality is pretty decent for most situations as long as you don't set the sampling rate too low, but if you are an audiophile you want the highest fidelity possible. In the same way,

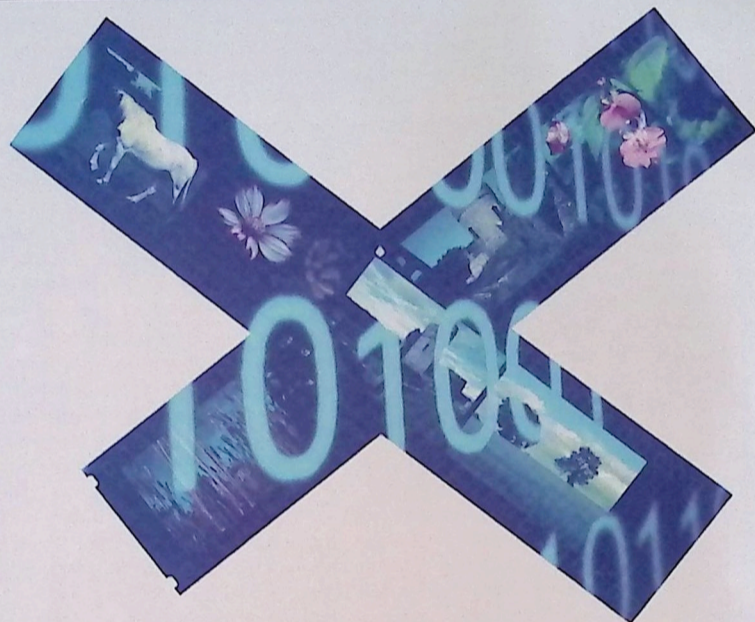
the Raw format appeals to photographers that want the highest possible image quality in their photos.

Raw files are the digital equivalent of a film negative. Many of the exposure parameters haven't yet been applied to the image data, the image hasn't been re-sampled to a different size, and no compression (or at least no destructive lossy compression) has been applied. Two immediate advantages of this are that you can change exposure settings after the fact, and you have all the image data since nothing has been discarded through size reduction resampling or lossy compression. To continue the music analogy, the Raw file is comparable to the pre-mixed session tracks.

Another advantage of Raw comes from the higher bit depth of the image data. JPEG images contain 8-bit information for each of the red, green and blue colour channels but Raw image data may have 12-bit or 14-bit data. Higher bit images contain more colour and tonal data, so you can do more radical tonal shifting or colour correction without visibly degrading the image.

What's wrong with Raw files? One problem is that a Raw image will be a bigger file size than if it were saved as a JPEG. This means you can save fewer Raw files to your camera's memory card, images will take longer to transfer from camera to computer, and will also take up more space on your hard drive, CD or other archive. The files also have to be processed into a standardized file format like JPEG before you can use them. Finally, the Raw file format isn't an open standard. Each manufacturer's Raw format is unique and proprietary so you must rely on the manufacturer to supply a converter, or trust third party image software makers to support them. That may not be a problem today, but five years down the road, who can say?

By David Tanaka



Photoshop Photo Effects Cookbook

By Tim Shelbourne

Published by O'Reilly, 2005

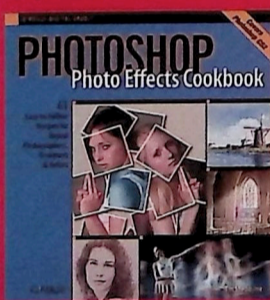
ISBN: 0596-10322-1

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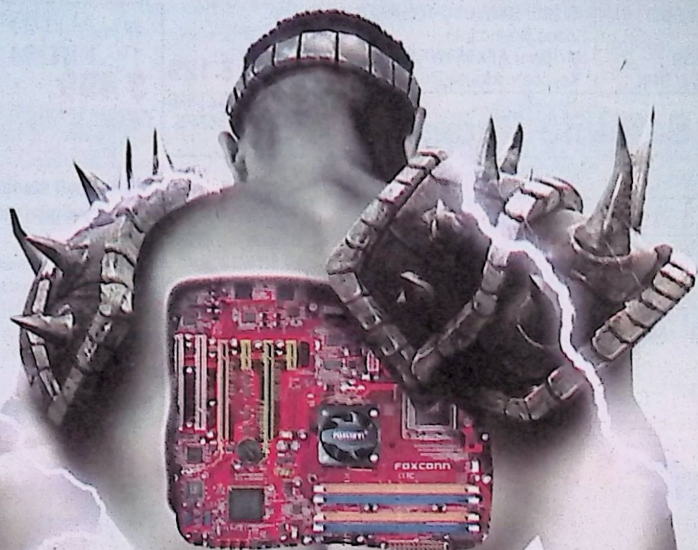
Quick, what's high-key lighting? What about Chiaroscuro? The former is a bright and airy lighting style common in glamour photography. The latter is a painting style characterized by dramatic contrasts, often called Rembrandt lighting since it is one of the master's signature styles. What they have in common is the Photoshop Photo Effects Cookbook. Here,

author Tim Shelbourne shows you how to create the look of these and dozens of other effects using Photoshop. Pure photographers will find a few interesting techniques but the book will really appeal to graphic artists and photo illustrators. The easy-to-follow text is well-illustrated with many photos and screenshots of the relevant Photoshop tools and dialogues.



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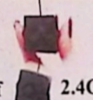
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Test Lab: The Projector Inspector

Sure, I used to have an "Official Bikini Inspector" T-shirt. Who didn't? In fact, I still have it but due to the creepiness of a middle-aged man with a beluga-sized midriff wearing it, I've decided to cross out "Bikini" and add "Projector." Projection inspection was done using Displaymate (www.displaymate.com) with the projectors calibrated using a Spyder2PRO. All projectors came with some degree of vertical keystone correction, a zoom lens and a two year warranty with 90 days for the lamp, unless otherwise noted. Also, econo-mode brightness, fan noise and lamp life are shown.

Powerlite 76c

Manufacturer: Epson www.epson.ca Estimated price: \$1,200

Imaging system: LCD Brightness: 2000/1500 lumens

Contrast ratio: 400:1 Fan noise: 36dB/30dB

Weight: 5.8 lbs Lamp life: 2000/3000 hrs

Estimated lamp price: \$370

Features: $\pm 30^\circ$ keystone correction, no cool-down time, mouse emulation, carry case

The 76C is gun-metal grey with a host of controls on top. It has a help button along with full access to the menu from the projector controls. Some projectors force you to use a remote for specific functions, which means that if you lose it, you're out of luck.

Inputs are plentiful including a monitor out, USB port, S-Video, VGA and



composite. Audio is input via RCA plugs but there is no pass through, which likely won't be an issue for most users.

The remote is excellent with a flat joystick allowing scrolling on zoom-in and moving an on-screen pointer, that can replace a laser pointer.

The kit is not bad either, including an RGB cable and carry case, but the 3-foot power cord to a standard but uncommon input had me shaking my head. Greyscale tracking is very good but I noticed some clipping near the



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top and bottom [pure white and black] during testing. I measured a contrast ratio of 212:1. Use this ratio only to compare against the other projectors reviewed here as there was a touch of ambient light during testing, thus lowering the result. Finally, the 76C features very fast warm up and cool down times that can be a real boon for guerrilla presenting applications such as speed dating or multi-level marketing.

Pros: Instant off/quick on, good controls, bright

Cons: Short power cable

LV-X6

Manufacturer: Canon **Estimated price:** \$1,500

Imaging system: LCD **Brightness:** 1500/1100 lumens

Contrast ratio: 500:1 **Fan noise:** 32dB/25dB

Weight: 6.4 lbs **Lamp life:** 3000/4000 hrs

Estimated lamp price: \$600

Features: ±30° keystone correction, wall colour correction, three-year warranty, carry case, 1.6:1 zoom

Canon's contribution is an attractive but chunky unit. It comes with a VGA and power cable and a very useable case is included. The main thing that struck me was how quiet it was. It's not really suitable as a projector cum hair dryer, which I find rather irksome as I now need to buy both. Connectivity is good with a monitor loop through, S-Video, VGA, composite and RCA jacks for audio. Component input is supported with a \$70 breakout cable. Also, the remote mouse function requires the purchase of an IR receiver for the computer, which isn't very helpful. The long zoom coupled with the wall colour correction allows for a lot of flexibility to where it can project to and from. This preset colour correction allows you to project on a green blackboard, among other things. The menu system is straightforward with presets for movies, video, sRGB as well as full colour control. It allows no user-defined presets, but changes are retained for factory presets. I measured a contrast ratio of 240:1 with very good greyscale tracking. The warranty includes a loaner unit for its duration and the 120 day lamp warranty is longer than average. Also, the lamp is rated to last longer than average but this is mitigated by its high price. Also, the lumen output is adequate but not stellar and, well, the unit is expensive. If you need the unique features it offers, it is well worth the money as add-on projector lenses certainly cost more than the price difference and projectors this quiet are hard to come by.

Pros: Very quiet, flexible placement

Cons: Expensive, low brightness



Canon LV-X6

Performa CP-RX61

Manufacturer: Hitachi **www.hitachi.ca** **Estimated price:** \$1,100

Imaging system: LCD **Brightness:** 1600/1280 lumens

Contrast ratio: 500:1 **Fan noise:** 38dB/33dB

Weight: 5.1 lbs **Lamp life:** 2000/3000 hrs

Estimated lamp price: \$300

Features: 2 x RGB in, RGB out, 3 year warranty

The CP-RX61 is the smallest and lightest unit in the roundup making it a good contender for travelling. It comes with a full set of international power cords and an RGB cable, but no carrying case. The shiny black remote looked like it was from the 1980s and is hard enough to read in daylight, let alone a darkened room. The magnify and zoom functions are a bit cumbersome and really should be amalgamated, and remote mouse is not supported, mercifully really.

The OSD menu has two settings, "advance" (sic) and "easy," which is wisely put to the lower right side and can be repositioned. The "advance" menu allows for storage of four user presets and has extensive gamma and colour controls as well. Greyscale tracking was okay but the greyscale was uneven with a noticeable jump around 10 per cent. Near whites and near blacks were clipped but not seriously. The Spyder measured its contrast ratio at a pretty good 275:1. Also, note that the lamp is warranted for a normal 90 days but only 180 hours of use, which is quite low. Still, the CP-RX61 is cheap, portable and bright enough.

Pros: Reasonable price, lightweight, flexible inputs, cheap lamp

Cons: Hard to read remote, low hours on lamp warranty, minor colour issues



Hitachi Performa CP-RX61

PJ656

Manufacturer: Viewsonic **www.viewsonic.com** **Estimated price:** \$1,300

Imaging system: LCD **Brightness:** 2100

Contrast ratio: 400:1 **Fan noise:** 38dB/33dB

Weight: 6.2 lbs **Lamp life:** 2000/3000 hrs

Estimated lamp price: \$430

Features: 3 year warranty, 1 year lamp warranty, 2 x RGB in or 1 x RGB out/in, component in, remote mouse, carry case

Viewsonic's offering comes with a standard kit with power, RGB and A/V cables. It's not a bad looking unit and feels solid to the touch. However, the birds embroidered on the rather excellent case would challenge the steely manhood of quite a few. Nothing scissors can't fix.

The remote looks suspiciously similar to the Hitachi's and the menu system is precisely the same. The remote is much easier to read, though, because it is matte not shiny. Inputs are generous with component video in and one RGB plug that can be switched from input to output. USB is used to

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Réseau 10-100
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Tour Médium ATX
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- Système C3 2000+ \$189.99
- Système XP 1800+ \$199.99
- Système XP 2800+ \$239.99

AJOUT D'OPTION DISPONIBLE

Portable ACER TravelMate

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Vidéo 64mb 3D (partagé)
DVD Combo Graveur
Son PCI 3D
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Modem 56K V92
2 ports USB 2.0
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Réseaux sans fil 55G
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Garantie 1 an (pièces & main d'œuvre)
• AMD 3000+ : \$ 759.99

Portable ACER travelMate

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15.4" TFT Actif
512 Mo DDRAM 333 mhz
Disque dur 80 Go ATA 100
Vidéo 128 mb 3D (partagé)
Graveur DVD dual layer
Son PCI 3D
Haut-Parleurs intégrés
Modem 56K V92
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Windows xp inclus
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AJOUT D'OPTION DISPONIBLE

Ajout d'option (système)

- 128 @ 256 Mb DRAM : \$19.99
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- 20Go @ 40Go 7200 T : \$19.99
- 20Go @ 80Go 7200 T : \$39.99
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support remote mouse but you have to get your own cable.

The thing that grabbed my attention was the spot on greyscale tracking. It has a bit of a jump at about 20 per cent grey but is generally smooth. After calibration, this same area shows some tracking noise due to compensation. The econo mode brightness is not published but my measurements suggest it in the region of 1700 lumens. Also, it measured a contrast ratio of 193:1. This projector is a good all rounder with a slight edge

regarding connectivity and warranty compared to the Epson, though the contrast was a bit low.

Pros: Good colour, extensive connectivity, bright

Cons: Expensive lamp, contrast on low side

X3

Manufacturer: InFocus www.infocus.com

Estimated price: \$1,100

Imaging system: DLP Brightness: 1700/1100 lumens

Contrast ratio: 2000:1 Fan noise: 39dB/37dB

Weight: 6.8 lbs Lamp life: 4000 hrs

Estimated lamp price: \$390

Features: 1 year warranty, 1 x RGB out, remote mouse

The X3 is a fairly bulky beast but not too hard on the eyes. It comes with an A/V, power and InFocus's proprietary M1A to VGA and USB breakout cable. While this last cable supports mouse emulation right out of the box, it costs about \$75 to replace. Likewise a DVI-D to M1 adapter costs \$65 – ouch.

However, it does come with a printed manual and surprisingly, a 12V DC output for triggering an electric screen. The lamp is relatively inexpensive too, which is a big plus. The menu system is logical, with three user-defined colour presets as well as video, cinema and many



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more. Using anything other than the presentation preset causes light output to drop noticeably.

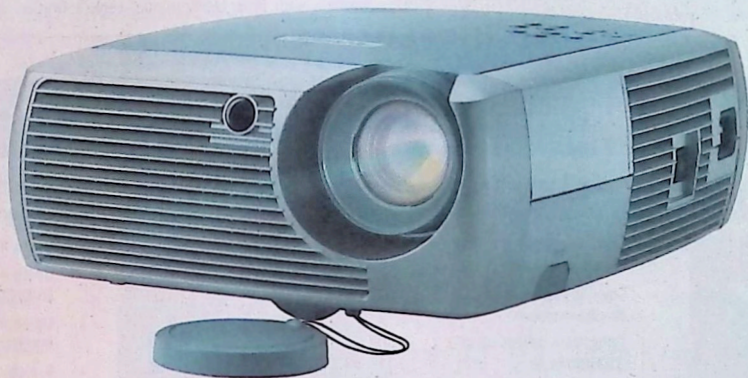
The picture is high contrast, in keeping with DLP, but there are noticeable tracking errors through the greyscale. Contrast measured at 730:1 and games looked great. Unfortunately, the depth of field of the projected image was small enough so that either the top or bottom of the image was slightly out of focus in our testing due to tilting. It also needed more distance from itself to the screen than any of the others here for a given screen size. Both

these optical issues limit flexibility; however, it does win the big sound award having a 2.5-watt speaker instead of a 1-watt. It's a good candidate to be a ceiling mounted boardroom projector or for gaming.

Pros: High contrast ratio, cheapest lamp, remote mouse without cable purchase

Cons: Short warranty, no case, proprietary cables, bit bulky

By Andrew Carruthers



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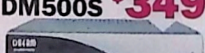
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Getting content for your HDTV

It was finally time to replace your television, so you opted for one of those sleek new widescreen HDTVs. The salesman explained that you can watch your favourite TV shows, movies and sporting events in stunning detail, and you likely got a taste of this jaw-dropping clarity at the store before you pulled out the credit card.

But somehow the pictures at home don't look as good as promised. What's going on here?

Proper cables

First, in order to see an HDTV image on your screen you must use the proper cables that run between your satellite or cable TV receiver and your television (the exception is over-the-air HD broadcasts, see below).

With standard definition programming, common connectors are the red, yellow and white composite ("RCA") cords or an S-Video cable which has a round tip with little teeth inside. High-definition programming, however,

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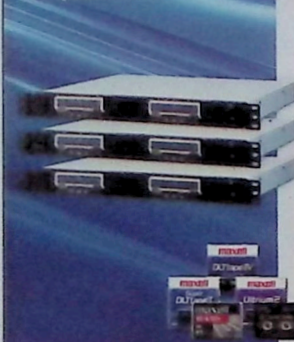


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requires component cables (red, blue and green), DVI cable, or the preferred HDMI, which offers the highest quality uncompressed video and audio data between receiver and TV.

Tune in

Next, you need to subscribe to HDTV programming from your cable or satellite TV provider. This means you must rent or buy a receiver box capable of accepting an HDTV signal, and then likely pay a little extra per month to pick up the high-def channels.

For example, Bell ExpressVU, a satellite-based provider, offers more than 40 high-definition channels for its viewers. Rogers Digital Cable currently offers 24 HD channels in its lineup.

Depending on your television, you may also receive a few free over-the-air HDTV signals. That is, many new televisions have a built-in ATSC tuner that allows you to receive over-the-air HD broadcasts from Canadian networks such as CityTV, CTV, CBC and SunTV, and depending on where you live, a handful of U.S. stations too, including PBS, NBC and ABC. All you need to pick up is an antenna from your local electronics store.

HD flicks on discs

Since you've invested in an HDTV capable of displaying up to 1080 lines of resolution instead of your DVD's 480, the market is ripe for a new disc format.

Not unlike the Betamax versus VHS war in the early '80s, two competing and incompatible formats are now vying for your dollar: HD DVD and Blu-ray.

Because both of these technologies can store more data on the same-sized 12 cm disc (read by a blue laser instead of your DVD player's red laser), HD DVD and Blu-ray can deliver true HD video clarity, better-sounding audio tracks and other interactive extras.

Both offer backwards compatibility so they'll play your current DVDs, though this feature is not compulsory for Blu-ray machine manufacturers as it is for makers of HD DVD players.

Products available at the time of writing include two Toshiba HD DVD players – the HD-A1 (\$699) and the more feature-rich HD-XA1 (\$999) and Sony's first Blu-ray player, the BDP-S1 (\$1,300).

Games and home movies too

Your HDTV wasn't made just for TV shows, movies and sports – but also videogames and home movies.

The Xbox 360 (\$399 - \$499) can deliver HD content, which includes resolutions of 720p or 1080i and multi-channel surround sound. Sony's PlayStation 3 will also offer high-definition gaming when it debuts later this year.

Finally, home video enthusiasts may want to ditch their aging camcorder for a new HD model in order to enjoy professional-looking visuals and digital audio on an HDTV set. Sony, for example, offers the HDRHC3 Handycam Camcorder for \$1,999.

By Marc Saltzman



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Slingbox offers cable TV to go

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\$299 www.slingmedia.com

Pros:

- Easy set-up
- Installs on unlimited machines
- No subscription fees

Cons:

- No built-in wireless connectivity
- Clunky appearance

Watching Hockey Night in Canada from your hotel room in Japan? If you already have cable television and high-speed internet subscriptions, you can do that – and much more – with the help of Sling Media's Slingbox.

The silver and orange power brick-shaped device connects to your home entertainment system and streams content through your network to any laptop or PC with high-speed internet access. The benefits range from being able to watch cable television in another room in the house, to the coffee shop down the street, to anywhere in the world (provided there's access to high-speed internet).

Installing the Slingbox

Getting the Slingbox up and running was a painless and straightforward process. First we connected the Slingbox to our TV source – in this case, a cable box – using the included S-video and audio cables. These cables also accommodate satellite boxes and DVRs, and additional coaxial cable is

supplied in the event that no audio/video outputs are available.

We were happy to see video and audio thrus on the back of the unit, meaning that the Slingbox isn't monopolizing the outputs of the device it's connected to.

The Slingbox can also be connected directly to the cable source in the wall. (A coaxial cable splitter can be purchased separately for around \$10 if needed; a bandwidth of at least 5MHz – 1,000MHz is recommended by the company).

Then it was a simple matter of connecting the included Ethernet cable to our network router, and installing and configuring the software on the machine we intended to stream the video to.

Unfortunately, the Slingbox isn't WiFi-enabled, meaning users wanting wireless connectivity must purchase additional hardware. For an extra \$129, the SlingLink will act as a bridge allowing the Slingbox to be connected to the home network wirelessly (useful if the TV is in a different room from the Ethernet connection, or if you simply want to avoid wire clutter).

Viewing

The SlingPlayer software needed to view the Slingbox's streamed content on a laptop or PC is included on an installation CD-ROM that comes with the product, and it can also be downloaded from www.slingmedia.com/support/downloads.php.

The first time we opened the SlingPlayer we were prompted to assign

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a name, password and access code to our Slingbox network. When installing the SlingPlayer on any additional machines we had to enter the same information to gain access to our network.

After the Video Tuning wizard configured our screen for optimal viewing conditions, we were free to tune into our cable television channels, which streamed without a hitch and offered decent picture quality from the smallest resolution (320 x 240) up to full-screen display.

The SlingPlayer functions admirably as a barebones video playback application, where channel flipping is done using a virtual television remote control called – wait for it – the SlingRemote.

Favourite channels can be assigned to a quick-select tab, and channel logos icons can be assigned to them for quicker identification. The icons are U.S.-centric, unfortunately, so expect to see images for MTV instead of MuchMusic – although custom logos can also be uploaded.

There's no copy-protection to the SlingPlayer software; it can be installed on an unlimited number of machines, but the cable TV signal will only stream to one computer at a time – a nifty and light-handed way of addressing copyright and security issues. The "N" in the Slingbox logo lights up if the cable is already being watched by another user in another location. If another person tries to activate the Slingplayer when TV is already being streamed at another location, the first person will receive an error message with the IP address and login name of whoever is currently watching.

The Slingbox only works with Windows so far, but plans to develop a Mac

client are in the works. According to the company, the downloaded software is compatible with Macs running Virtual PC and on the Intel Macs using Boot Camp or Parallels.

Thinking beyond the box

Besides cable television, the Slingbox has other applications, including streaming video from DVD players and VCRs, and even XM satellite radio. The possibilities for the device seem limited only by the creativity of its owners. A restaurant manager in the U.S., for example, uses Slingboxes to monitor his entire chain of 12 fast-food stores remotely by connecting a Slingbox to each security camera and VCR, according to a company spokesperson. There's also potential for the Slingbox in the realm of video production – using the device to stream raw footage from the day's video shoot so that editors on the other side of the country – or even the world – can provide feedback on it.

Final verdict

The Slingbox is a great idea if you're that much of a media junkie that you need to take your television with you. Although the decidedly un-slick package had us skeptical at first, the product won us over with its ease of use, decent-quality streaming and affordable price.

By Erin Bell

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Getting the most out of gaming in high def

High-definition console gaming arrived with Microsoft's Xbox 360 and will soon explode with the impending release of Sony's PlayStation 3 and Nintendo's Wii. The catch: if you want to take advantage of everything HD gaming has to offer – a clearer, more detailed picture presented in widescreen format – you'll need a television with a native resolution of at least 720p or 1080i.

However, unlike the good old days when shopping for a fancy television involved little more than deciding what size of screen we wanted and choosing the oak or the cedar case, consumers now need to research everything from connectivity options to the pros and cons of varying display technologies.

To help you along, here's a handy guide to the benefits and drawbacks of some of the more popular display options currently on the market. (You'll note that cathode ray tube televisions have been omitted from the discussion. While they still deliver the best colour reproduction and contrast ratio of any consumer display technology, the CRT's necessarily bulky design has all but doomed it to extinction.)

LCD

The advantages of LCD televisions are clear. They have a very long lifespan – typically around 60,000 hours – which means your set could last more than 30 years if you use it an average of five hours per day. They're also

extremely energy efficient, and they typically have a higher native resolution, which means your source HD signals are less likely to undergo image conversion processing. As a result, images will suffer from fewer digital artifacts, such as blotchy spots of colour.

Still, serious gamers used to scoff at the notion of using an LCD for gaming due to their reputation for poor image refresh rates. Pictures with plenty of motion – particularly those seen in fast-paced games like first-person shooters – had a tendency to lag perceptibly. However, LCD technology has improved to the point that visible lag no longer exists in the vast majority of first-tier models. To be safe, however, you should double-check that the LCD you're considering has an image refresh rate of about 5-8 milliseconds – any slower (higher) and you could experience some lag problems.

Aside from the extremely high price points associated with larger screen sizes, the only real disadvantage of LCDs these days is their inability to show true blacks. The nature of LCD technology requires that the screen be backlit, which means all colours are created using light. As a result, blacks often look more like dark grays. In gaming terms, lack of true blacks could have an impact on the player's ability to make out details in darkly lit scenes. With each new generation of LCD the black problem gets less noticeable, but it still exists in current models.

The three top players in the LCD arena are Sony, Sharp, and Samsung. Samsung has taken advantage of its strategic partnership with Microsoft's Xbox 360 division to develop a picture preset geared for gamers that focuses specifically on bringing out detail in shadows. The feature can be found on their brand new 51 series televisions, the 40-inch model of which is priced at \$3,200.

A step up from Samsung's 51 series is Sony's top-of-the-line KDL-V40XBR1 Bravia, a 40-inch model that goes for about \$4,500 and delivers remarkably deep blacks. If you have your heart set on LCD and money is no object, this could be the way to go.

Meanwhile, Sharp continues to set the bar for price/performance. Their Aquos LCD lineup currently includes the 37-inch LC-37D40U, which is on sale at many retailers for a remarkably low \$2,700 and has a spec sheet that fares quite nicely against competing models that cost hundreds or thousands more. If you're on a budget, it's hard to beat.

Plasma

If you want a big (42 inches or greater) flat panel display and you're counting pennies, plasma is likely your best bet. In addition to the price/size benefit, plasma also has the capacity to deliver incredibly deep blacks; the inky shadows in the dungeons of the Xbox 360 game *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, for example, look terrific on a plasma display. This is the primary reason why many videophiles prefer plasma over LCD.

But the disadvantages of plasma screens are significant. For starters, they're power hogs that have the potential to seriously jack up your power bill – those all-night gaming sessions could start to cost you more than just sleep. Also, when set to maximum brightness, the life of a plasma is typically about half that of an LCD. Image burn-in – especially in lower end models – can be a major concern for those of

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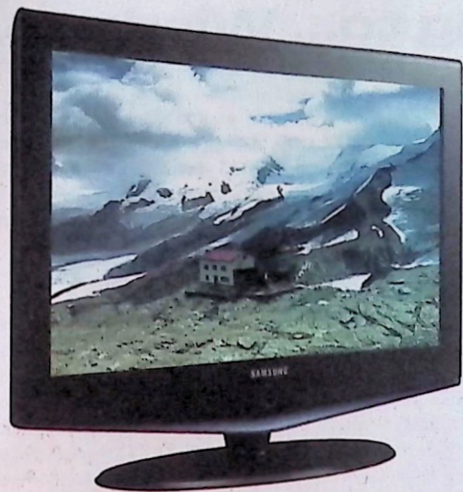
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us who enjoy games that feature a static heads-up display (HUD). Many Xbox 360 arcade games are notorious for their persistent HUDs.

Last but not least, plasma screens typically have a lower native resolution. In fact, many plasma sets billed as HD aren't truly HD; they have the correct number of pixels in each vertical row to support 720p, but fewer than the required 1280 pixels in each horizontal row. That means source signal conversion processing comes into play, and that's never a good thing.

If these issues don't concern you, then two of your best options are from Panasonic and Hewlett-Packard. Panasonic's 42-inch TH42PX60U is the country's best selling plasma display, retailing at most stores for about \$3,500. This award-winning television has received rave reviews from critics worldwide for its picture quality, longevity, and resistance to image burn-in.

HP's rival model, the PL4200N, delivers a picture that's nearly as impressive, but it comes with a slightly lower MSRP — \$3,300 — as well as a more complete suite of connectivity options for gamers, including not only component jacks for game consoles but also a VGA port that may come in handy for computer gamers.

Rear-projection

Rear-projection sets may still require users to replace expensive bulbs every few years, but advances in core technologies have resulted in decreased set depth and increased viewing angles (which means you no longer have to stand directly in front of the screen to properly view the image), as well as the capacity to deliver extremely high native resolutions without breaking the bank, which makes rear-projection an attractive option.

Sony's 60-inch KDS-R60XBR1 Grand Wega is famous for its crystal clear images and silky smooth video. At \$5,500 it's a fair bit pricier than a 720p display, but it might be worth the stretch for PlayStation3 owners who want to take full advantage of their console's power.

But it's not the only game in town. You can get five more inches for the same price with HP's MD6580, a 65-inch DLP microdisplay with a stunning contrast ratio that makes use of HP's "wobulation" technique to virtually eliminate all traces of the so-called screen door effect (the black lines typically seen between individual pixels).

Front projection

Front projection systems typically have all sorts of disadvantages, ranging from the need for a darkened room to the noise generated by the cooling fan. But they do have one unique benefit: the ability to deliver wall-sized images.

In gaming terms, such massive screen sizes can let players see important background details they might otherwise have missed. Extremely large screen sizes also provide an advantage in split-screen games — four people playing a split-screen shooter can each have their own 50-inch screen.

There's currently one runaway favourite for gamers on the front projection scene: Panasonic's PTAE900U LCD HD Home Cinema Projector. It has the highest contrast ratio of any projector in its class and price range, handling shadowy scenes in games remarkably well and rendering fast moving sequences with hardly any noticeable lag. Priced at \$3,000, you won't find a projector that does a better job of displaying games for less.

By Chad Sapieha



Moving to Mac: Moving to... Windows

When Apple announced that it would be transitioning its Mac line to Intel processors, there was much speculation that these new machines would not only provide better performance when it came to Mac applications, but that users who were so inclined would be able to install Windows on those same Macs. After all, the new Macs would be using fairly standard hardware components, so the assumption was that getting Windows installed would be a cinch.

In the world of computers, however, nothing ever really goes as planned, and there was one big obstacle standing in the way of cleanly installing Windows onto these new computers: the Extensible Firmware Interface (also known as the EFI), a technology that Intel has slated as the replacement for the trusty old BIOS. Quite simply, the Windows XP installer had no clue what the EFI even was, and without that understanding, there was no way for the installer program to actually get Windows onto Apple's hardware, otherwise compatible or not.

This was an unfortunate bit of news for a lot of people, but specifically for one user who promised his boss that the new MacBook Pro notebooks would be able to dual-boot between the two different operating systems. After getting his hands on the MacBook Pro and realizing his mistake, he did the only sensible thing possible: he started up a website and promised a reward to whoever could find a legal way to get Windows onto Intel-based Apple hardware.

The bounty at that site (onmac.net) kept building until a pair of resourceful programmers posted a solution and collected a reward of over \$13,000. The instructions for doing it yourself (as well as the downloads necessary to accomplish it) were posted on the site shortly afterwards.

Onmac.net

The solution found on onmac.net was not exactly the simplest. In addition to having to get your hands on a Windows machine to burn a new, modified copy of the Windows XP installation CD, you had to do some command line modifications of your Mac's boot files. Thankfully, they include a Nero project file and the instructions for modifying your old CD.

If you already know the ins and outs of the Mac, it isn't quite so difficult, but for a relatively new user, scrolling through the four pages of instructions can be quite intimidating. That doesn't even cover the fact that to make this particular solution work, you typically have to erase your hard drive, re-partition it into two drives and then reinstall Mac OS X on one of those partitions before you can even get started putting Windows on. Even then, you still won't have a fully functional Windows machine, because many of the drivers weren't available – and still aren't as I write this.

If you're the owner of one of the new Intel-powered Macs, and were thinking of trying this particular method out because you'd really like to have access to some of your favourite Windows programs on the same machine, let me save you some time: don't bother with this solution just yet.

I recently took some time to step through the process and got Windows running on a 17-inch iMac; in the end, I found that while there was definitely a bit of a thrill finally getting Windows running, the lack of separately-available drivers means that the machine won't be anywhere near the performance level you'd expect (especially with the lack of proper graphics drivers).

Worse, I found the machine unreliable: more than once I had to completely reinstall everything, because the machine started freezing up whenever I selected the Windows icon from the bootloader screen.

Boot Camp

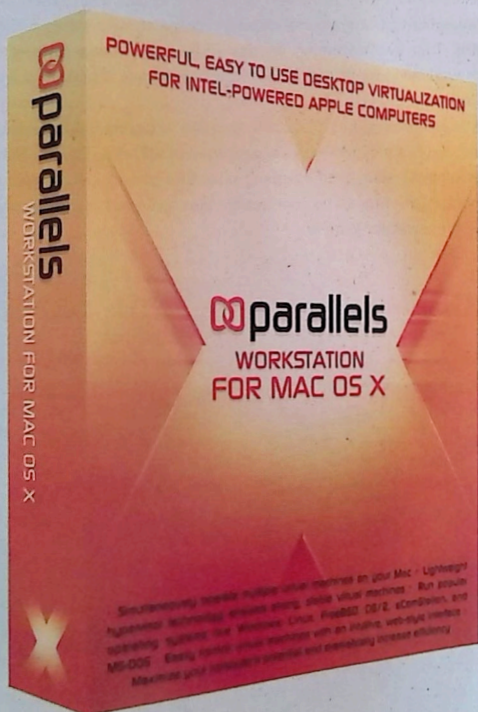
Almost immediately after the onmac.net solution hit the web, Apple did the unexpected: they released the public beta of a new software package called Boot Camp Assistant, which is a Mac OS X application that allows you to repartition your current hard drive without losing the data currently on it. Then, you set up a new Windows partition and burn a CD with the vast

Parallels

Both Boot Camp and Onmac's solutions require a reboot. However, there's another new product called Parallels Workstation (www.parallels.com) that looks promising for a few reasons. Unlike any other dual-OS system, Parallels allows you to keep Mac OS X running and open up Windows XP in a virtual window. In other words, it's doing much the same thing that Microsoft's own Virtual PC did on older Macs, but by harnessing the power of the Intel processors it promises to do a much better job.

Not only can Parallels handle XP, it can also handle all of the older versions of Windows back to Windows 3, and it will allow you to run any version of Linux. It'll even handle OS/2! Of course, you'll need the installation CDs for every operating system you want to put on the machine, and each of them will eat up hard drive space.

As I write this, Parallels is still only available in beta form, but when it does become available as a final release product, it will cost US\$50 (about \$56). I haven't had the opportunity to try it out yet, but I will report back.



majority of the drivers necessary for the hardware found inside the new Macs. The downside is that if you don't have a copy of Windows XP with Service Pack 2 onboard, you'll have to figure out a way to slipstream SP2 into the WinXP CD on your own. There are a number of sites available that can tell you how to do this. A web search for "slipstream windows xp sp2" should net some useful tips and tutorials.

From a usability perspective, Boot Camp is head and shoulders above onmac.net's solution: apart from updating your Mac's firmware, almost everything is automated. There's no need for messing around in the

command line performing actions that could cause serious harm to your system if you get them wrong. Following the installation of Windows XP itself, the driver installation is pretty smooth. As ever, there are still a few issues.

For one, while the onmac.net solution automatically gives you a bootloader every time you fire up the computer (complete with beautifully-designed icons), a machine treated with Boot Camp will force you to hold down the Option key during startup if you want to choose your boot partition. Otherwise it will simply default to the one you've specified. And if you're anything like me, you'll find yourself regularly forgetting to hold down the key, and booting into the wrong operating system. Also, once you've held down Option during startup, you'll realize that Apple's version of the bootloader is quite ugly; it's not a huge deal, but considering Apple's usual attention to the design of both its hardware and software, it's surprising.

Second, after you install Windows XP you may end up automatically booting into XP every time you fire up the machine. Thankfully, this is a fairly easy fix: you simply go into the System Preferences on the Mac side (hold down Option and then choose the Mac partition) and change your default boot partition under the Startup Disk option.

By Sean Carruthers



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Web hosting services

The net is largely anonymous. However, there's no need to exist in obscurity. Creating a basic personal or professional website is a relatively simple affair. Little or no knowledge of HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) or newer standards like XML (Extensible Markup Language) and CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) is required to net decent results.

For the purpose of this roundup, we'll focus on simple do-it-yourself website hosting and creation packages. Many of these services allow clients to use dedicated website creation software like Adobe's Dreamweaver [formerly Macromedia]. For creating more advanced websites with enhanced functionality, some of these software packages are excellent. However, for a relatively simple site whose intention is to disseminate information rather than to specifically entertain visitors, the generally simple drag-and-drop online interfaces and software included with most hosting packages will suffice.

Free but limited Google Pages Beta

Not yet in full release, Google Pages is another of the recent slew of online apps to come out of the company's think tanks.

To trial the service, hopefuls must already have an active Gmail account. Online signup for Gmail is limited to invitations or SMS-based authorization where Google sends an activation code to a cell phone.

Catch is, while we use the same country code as the United States (+1), the SMS messages don't seem to come to Canadian carriers.

I have several invites kicking around. Email me at andrew@ppublishing.ca if you'd like one and I'll do my best to oblige.

Assuming users jump through the appropriate hoops, they'll find a holder page already set up for them at username.googlepages.com. Upon logging in to page manager, users are presented with a clean interface where they can begin creating pages for public view.

There are a number of colour schemes available to choose from but few actual layout choices to make. Users are currently limited to four templates that, while functional, are somewhat limiting. There's good news however, in that templates and colours can be switched and immediately updated without losing page content.

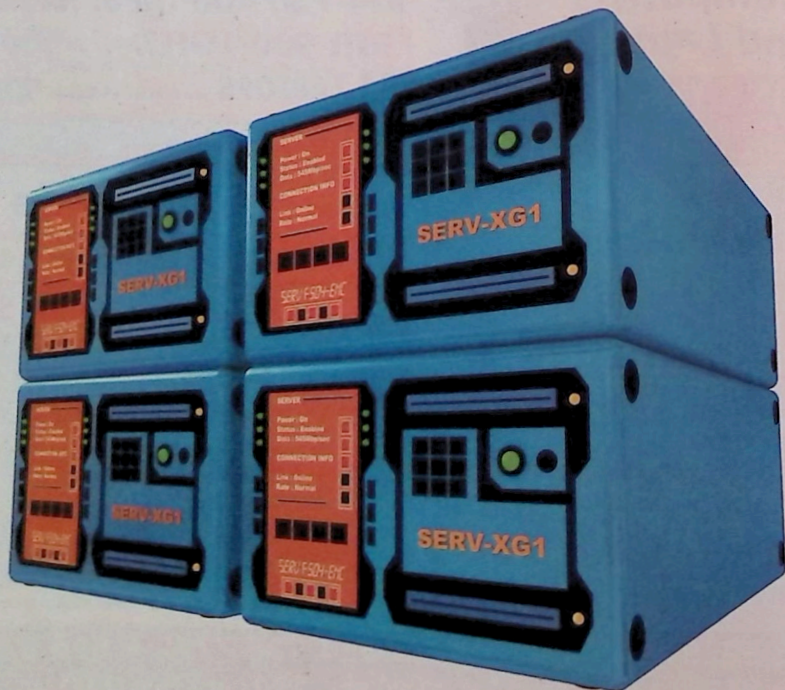
Users are offered 100MB of web space, which is good considering the fact that there's absolutely no cost associated. While it's not as nice as having a yourname@yourdomain.ca personalized email address, your email address and site URL are nonetheless tied.

Simplicity is the name of the game here, which is both a good and bad point. Good in the sense that designing a page is a very simple and gratifying affair; bad in the sense that even novice users will likely run into the limitations of the "what you see is what you get" (WYSIWYG) page editor.

Important steps like uploading images or other files for hosting or display is simple and works very much like an email application. Linking to other pages – either on your own site or elsewhere on the web – is also very simple.

However, running two images beside each other on a page is difficult if not impossible to accomplish and users can't create their own link tables or page templates. In short Pages Beta requires that user adapt to it, not vice-versa.

That said, the end result of just a few hours work is a clean, professional looking if bare-bones personal web site.



Paid and powerful

Netfirms

On the polar opposite end of the spectrum is Netfirms and its small business web hosting plan.

While decidedly un-free at \$12.95 per month, this may be a case where you get what you pay for. Namely, significantly more than any free site and all but required for creating anything more than a simple personal site.

A free starter CD (users pay \$8 for shipping) includes NetFusion software, which is a fairly easy entry point to site creation for a savvy beginner. The software package grows with users as they gain experience and a 40-page "Web Hosting Reference Guide" can be intimidating, but offers fairly simple step-by-step guides for web site creation, file transfer protocol (FTP) uploading, email account creation, online store creation among others.

The service costs \$12.95 per month for a .ca domain registration, which includes two domain names, 20GB of site storage and a monthly bandwidth allowance of 750GB that can be upgraded for a fee... if you're fortunate

Applications for a personal site

Job hunting: A well thought out online touch point for employers can set you apart from other candidates and shows some lateral thinking.

Family web site: Keep family in the loop by offering up a family home page for relatives to see pictures, read updates, view family videos and the like.

Create your community: Creating a web site for your own small community or community organization gives people a forum and opens the lines of communication.

Business: A web site is all but required for an independent business. Potential customers or clients can interact and get answers to many of their questions, even from a simple web site.

When two become one

Using Google Pages Beta, setting up a basic site is simple. However, the URL it provides you with is awkward and isn't very personalized (or professional) at all.

Many hosting services allow for simple registration of an available domain name but hobbles users with a tiny amount of available web space and available monthly bandwidth.

By registering a domain name and forwarding traffic to that domain to a Google Pages page, users get the benefit of simple site creation and a reasonable amount of online storage and bandwidth and a personalized URL. Also, included in many registration packages is one yourname@yourdomain.com email address.

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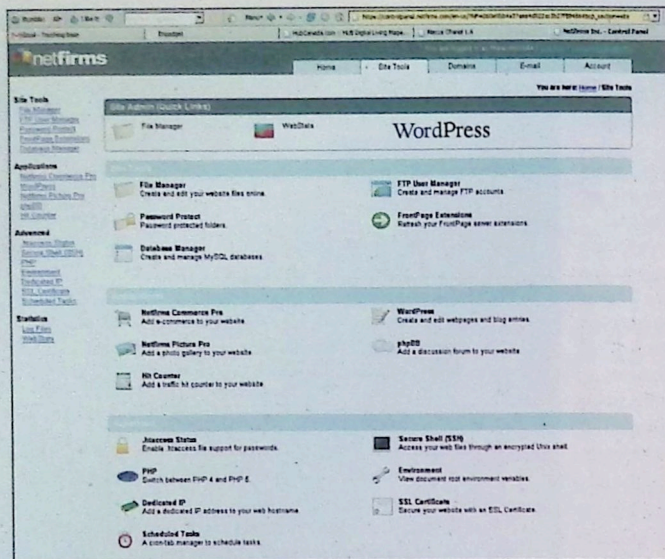
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Users are also free to explore their own creativity and after overcoming a significant learning curve, can run and administer their own site using the powerful and well laid out Netfirms Control Panel.

Also, in keeping with the current buzz, users can create a blog to keep site visitors in the loop as to the daily goings on in the company, including new

features announcements, client outreach and the like.

A way to manage opt-in subscribers to newsletters or other such promotional material would be a nice touch. While users can setup and administer SQL databases to collect data from visitors willing to give it up, they're on their own for ways to reach out to said visitors after the fact.

eHosting.ca

With a wide and varied menu of service level options, eHosting.ca has something for just about every user level.

From the \$1.95/mo. Email Plan where users can create up to 25 email inboxes and an unlimited number of forwarding "virtual" email addresses to the \$49.95/mo. Absolute Plan that allows users to create up to 25 separate web sites under one plan, complete with 3GB of online storage and add-on shopping cart options.

Users can create limited pages in the web-based control panel, as well as administer accounts, create and change email addresses, check billing and do other such tasks.

Of particular interest is the company's Site2Go package where users can create a fairly deep site using one of

eHosting.ca's theme templates.

Using a word processing interface, users can create the text and an upload utility makes adding pictures a simple affair. Site2Go is suitable for creating a business support site where potential customers can find out more information on your business and make contact through the site.

By Andrew Moore-Crispin



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
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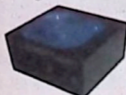
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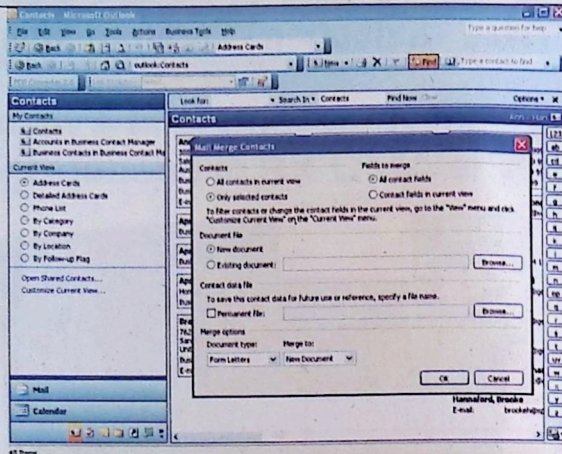
Mail merging: Not just bulk mail

Mail merge is an interesting tool. Even though it's been around in word processing software since the earliest days, it's still one of the program's most misunderstood features. It's also a very powerful one. It can assemble a bulk mailing for a handful of people or for thousands in as long as it takes to print the letters and fold them. It can also do much more than just type letters. This month, I'll lift the lid on Word's mail merge tool and show you what you're missing.

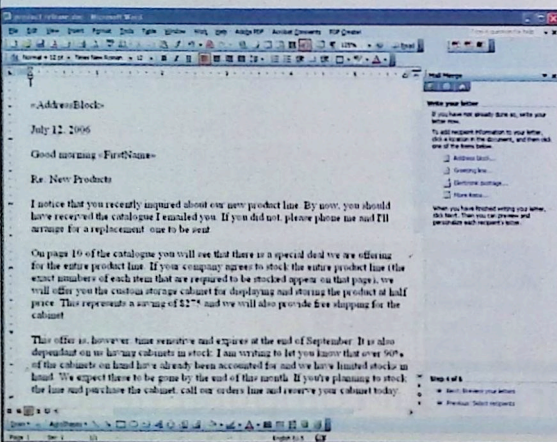
At its simplest, mail merge is the process of marrying a list of names with a letter to create personalized letters to everyone on the list. You just give Word the letter and the list, tell it where the name and address goes in the letter and it's all done. So, where does the list come from? The answer is just about anywhere! You can make a merge from a list of Outlook contacts or an Excel file. You can also create a merge list just for the merge if you don't already have your data somewhere else.

From inside Outlook, for example, open the Contacts area, select the contacts to mail and choose Tools, Mail Merge. Accept the default settings by clicking "Ok" and Word will launch ready for you to type your letter. Once the letter is typed you'll add the merge field codes by choosing View, Task pane and opening the Mail merge pane. In step 4 of the task pane, click where the address will go and click Address Block to insert it. Do the same for the Greeting line. Move to the next step to preview your letters. If needed, go back a step and fine-tune them. In the final step you can print the letters or save them and edit them further, to add text to specific letters you select, for example.

To use an Excel worksheet or a list you create yourself, start in Word and choose Tools, Letters and Mailings, Mail Merge and choose Letters and then proceed through the next step. In step 3, choose "Existing list" to use a list from an Excel document or choose "Type a new list" to type a new list. If you type a list you can save it to your disk and then use it again in future when you need to create another merge to those same people (you can also edit it and add other people if desired). In future you would then choose the "Use an existing list" option as your list would have been saved in a Word .doc file.



Quick start a Word mail merge by selecting the contacts from Outlook to send the merge letter to.



Use merge fields to indicate where the data from your list is to appear in your letter or other document.

Making letters isn't all that you can do with mail merge. In step 1 of the Mail Merge task pane your options include envelopes so you can merge a set of names and addresses and print the results directly onto envelopes. If you prefer, choose Labels and "print mailing labels" instead. If you're planning a conference, choose the Labels option and merge just the first and last names to create name labels for each participant in your list.

When you choose the E-mail messages option the completed merge will be sent to Outlook to be emailed to recipients. You will, of course, need to have email addresses for all recipients and you will be prompted to include a subject line in the last step of the merge.

The Directory option is perhaps one of the most valuable. It lets you create a merge where multiple items appear on the same page. So, for example, if you're preparing for a conference and you need a checklist of attendees, use the Directory option to create it from your list. It will print on as many pages as is necessary and you can, as you design the list, choose the spacing between list items and exactly what information appears in the list.

The directory can also be used to put together a catalogue. In this instance, instead of a list of names and addresses you will have a list of items for your catalogue – this might be products, training courses or services you offer. When you set up the merge, you can arrange it so that multiple items appear on the same page. You can also include images in your merge so that your merged catalogue could, if desired, contain images of each product alongside the product description. To learn more, there is an excellent article at www.computorcompanion.com/LPMArticle.asp?ID=126 that explains how to do this.

By Helen Bradley

Win a CREATIVE

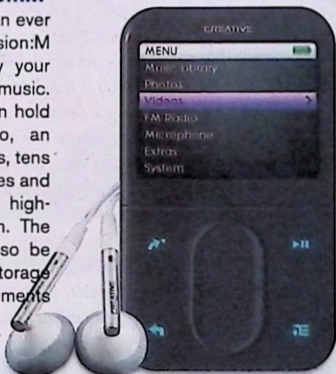
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SOHO : Internet security

A large number of teleworkers working for companies don't have to worry about internet security since they are provided protection by their employers. But, as trends indicate, there is an increasing number of self-employed teleworkers out there and they are in need of protection.

First of all, there is no such thing as a fool proof device or program to give you 100 per cent security and ensure peace of mind.

Some security solution developers may claim they can protect your computer against "unknown" viruses, but take this with a grain of salt. Vulnerabilities are discovered every day and hackers only take a few hours to exploit them for whatever purpose they may deem fit.

The good news is that security solution vendors like Symantec and McAfee now use worldwide networks of security experts who are on the lookout 24/7 for any new virus attacks. However, the problem they face is that new viruses spread at incredible speeds around the world and the longer those experts take to come up with solutions, the more computers potentially get hit and the more businesses get damaged. But within hours, the new viruses are neutralized and a remedy is made available.

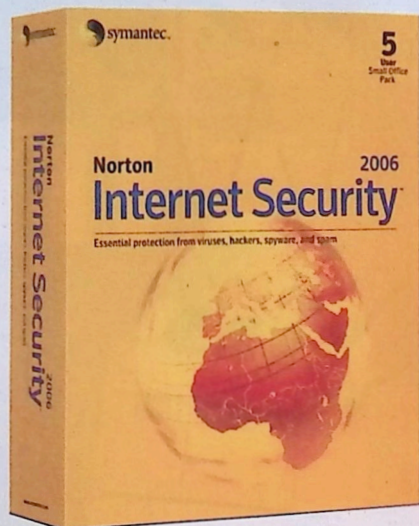
So, it's a matter of luck, really...

Nonetheless, it is imperative for teleworkers to protect themselves for the simple reason that known viruses do re-appear from time to time.

Teleworkers should be more concerned with people getting into their computer through spyware or directly through internet, and they are well advised to use a firewall application that will prevent anyone from the outside from getting into their machine. But an anti-spyware program should also be most welcome as it will prevent an intruder from getting inside your computer, perhaps with access to all your personal files.

Finally, teleworkers are also subjected to the onslaught of spam, those annoying email messages that solicit your interest in all kinds of gimmicks and wonder drugs while occupying a lot of space on your computer and thus reducing its performance.

Mac owners are lucky in this regard: Blue Frog, a spam vigilante software of sorts, has raised the ire of many spammers by sending automated



unsubscribe requests on behalf of its users, who remain anonymous in the process. Its website (www.bluesecurity.com), is constantly being knocked offline by denial of service attacks believed to be perpetrated by angry spammers.

Often PC users have to rely on the anti-spam programs offered by their browser or email software, and frankly those programs are not very effective in the sense that, if they do separate spam from genuine email messages, spam remains on your computer until you get rid of it.

Of course, there is always the danger of a genuine email message being labeled as spam by the computer and set aside, but this can only happen if the address of the sender does not appear on your contact list.

The cost of protecting oneself is not a major problem. A complete kit from McAfee, for instance, costs \$79.99. It includes a firewall, protection against viruses, spyware and spam, and a contract for an automatic update of all virus signatures. But you don't have to spend money to get protection – there are several anti-virus programs available free of charge on the internet. AVG (<http://free.grisoft.com>) offers a free edition that does quite a good job of filtering incoming and outgoing mail as well as downloads. It also offers a firewall if you need one, but at a price.

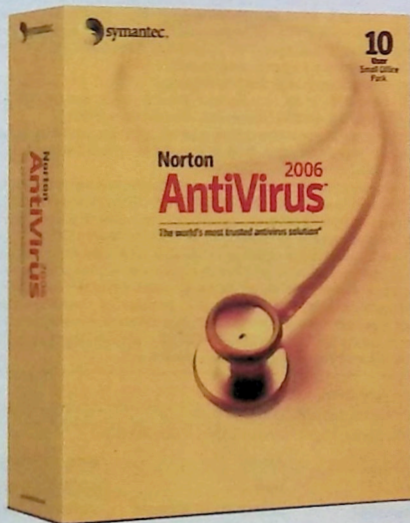
One of the most popular antivirus programs in Europe has been Kasperski (www.kasperski.com), a free Russian program which has only recently been edged out by a Czech program called Avast! (www.avast.com), which is also free.

One word of caution: Those programs are only available free to private individuals. If you register as a company you have to pay.

An anti-spyware program is also a must for teleworkers. Unfortunately, all the good programs tend to have a price, but they are worth investigating in. The best way is to simply try them out and pick the one that detects the most "foreigners" in your computer.

You'll be surprised how often intruders can get into your machine!

By André Salwyn



Hit the Road: Origami

Earlier in the year, there was a bit of buzz about Microsoft's Origami project, with widespread speculation as to what form it would actually take. One leading theory was that it would be a portable version of the Xbox. Well, game fans, you're out of luck: Origami is actually part of the new Ultra Mobile PC initiative, and while it does have a mobile gaming component, it's more a general-purpose platform for mobile computing.

Just before the official launch of the Ultra Mobile PC, a video of the new device leaked out to the world — intentionally, no doubt — to build up some hype. The video makes a point of using the word "free" several times, and goes on to show a variety of people using this new device to write notes,

draw sketches, pinpoint their location using GPS software, review photos, remotely control a Media Centre PC, play games wirelessly over the internet, instant messaging, and perhaps most ridiculously, check a "hand-written" note for directions.

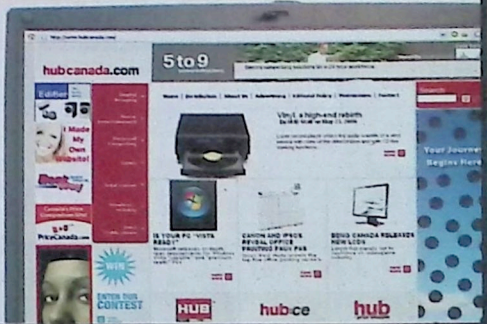
On the surface, the UMPC looks quite impressive. Full version of Windows XP and the ability to run standard Windows apps? Check! Integrated Bluetooth and WiFi? Check! Touch-screen for note-taking and sketching? Check! Gaming? check! Video and MP3 playback? Check!

Now, I tend to be fairly cynical when it comes to marketing, especially when it comes to products that claim to be the solution to all of your needs. My



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general suspicion is that with any device that does so many things, the likelihood that it does all of them well (or any of them well, for that matter) is small. And with the UMPC, there are a few really important questions that need to be explored.

Question 1: How big and heavy is one of these new UMPCs going to be? The device will be large enough to house a seven-inch LCD screen, and is expected to weigh about two pounds. In other words, it'll be pretty much smack dab in between the size of a Pocket PC and a Tablet PC, which is probably a reasonable size considering the variety of tasks the device will be expected to perform. The weight, on the other hand, is a bit much for a device that's meant to be a constant companion; it's about five times the weight of a Pocket PC. Imagine toting around a two-pound bag of carrots all day — yeah, it's okay for a short haul, but if it's always in a handbag, it starts to feel heavier and heavier as the day goes on.

Question 2: How much will it cost? Early reports claim that first generation Origami devices will check in at a cool US\$1,000 (about \$1,120), perhaps a bit more. If you don't think that sounds like a lot for such a full-featured device, it's worth noting that you can buy full-sized notebook computers starting at around US\$599 (about \$700), and those machines have many of the same capabilities and even have a larger, more costly screen — though they're also bigger and heavier, and not so much fun to tote around all day. In other words, for the time being, you're paying for the UMPC's smaller size, relative to a notebook. Of course, over the upcoming year, less costly versions of the UMPC are expected to become available.

Question 3: How do I interact with the device? As with the Pocket PC and Tablet PC, there's a touch-screen built into the UMPC devices, but unlike the Tablet, you won't need a special stylus. The UMPCs appear to be keyboard-optional, which means you may be on the hook for a bit more money if you want to use a keyboard for data input. Ultimately, that will be up to the manufacturers. As with Tablet PC and Pocket PC, Microsoft is simply providing the operating system, and other manufacturers like Asus and Samsung will be the ones providing the actual hardware. There will be an on-screen touch keyboard and button controls around the screen.

Question 4: The one question that everyone has really been pussyfooting around is the same one that gets asked when any new piece of portable technology hits the marketplace: How long will the battery last? The answer, according to Microsoft tech guru Robert Scoble, appears to be between two and three hours with the first generation of the devices. I repeat: two to three hours of battery life for a device that's designed to be a constant companion. Battery life was one of the things that kneecapped the Tablet PC platform. After all, if something is designed to replace a paper notepad, you shouldn't have to plug it in every few hours. The fact that the UMPC doesn't appear to do any better potentially bodes ill for its chances.

In the end, this looks like Tablet PC all over again, but in a smaller case. Before I'm truly sold on Origami as a device that will be a constant companion, it will need to be lighter, less expensive, and most importantly, feature a battery that will keep going as long as I do.

By Sean Carruthers



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Xbox Live Arcade

The Xbox Live Arcade has proven to be one of the most popular features of the Xbox 360 videogame console, with more than three million downloads during the first two months of its launch. With an Internet connection and an Xbox Live membership, the Xbox Live Arcade gives users access to an ever-growing library of casual games and retro classics, which can be downloaded for between \$5 and \$10 each.

Here's a taste of what's out there:

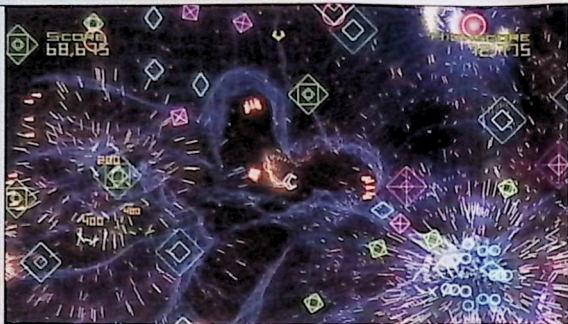
Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved

Geometry Wars first saw the light of day as an unlockable mini-game in the Project Gotham Racing series, and has grown from its humble beginnings to become one of the hottest Live Arcade games thus far.

It's a deceptively simple old-fashioned 2-dimensional arcade shooter – left analog stick to move, right analog stick to aim and fire – where the enemies are various geometric shapes that are constantly refilling the game grid.

"Retro Evolved" mostly refers to the graphics and special effects, which are absolutely gorgeous and well-suited to displaying on a crisp HDTV screen.

The original "Retro" version is playable as well.



Gauntlet

Experience a fresh dose of frustration – er, nostalgia – with this 80s arcade mainstay and notorious quarter-guzzler. There hasn't been much of an update to the game graphically speaking, and each annoying sound effect has been lovingly recreated, including the voice that petulantly remarks "Someone shot the food..."

And yet there's something strangely compelling about crawling through a dungeon while methodically hacking and slashing thousands of blocky baddies. Thankfully, too, health can now be replenished by pressing a button instead of donating another \$.25.

Up to three friends can plug in extra controllers to join in the fun, or hook up over Xbox Live.



Outpost Kaloki X

A space simulation on speed is probably the best way to describe Outpost Kaloki X, where the goal is to build additions onto a space station to turn it from a humble outpost to a thriving mecca for space travellers of all stripes, completing various mission goals in the process.

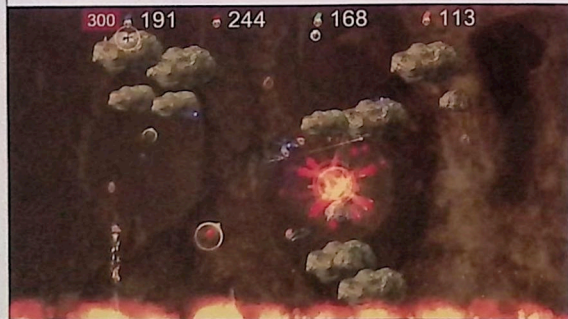
Power supply, store revenue, technological upgrades, research facilities, and tourist attracts all have to be juggled successfully – and if that weren't enough, the clock is ticking down all the while.

There isn't a lot of time to sit back and proudly watch your station flourish, so don't get any delusions of Godhood. Rather it's dive in, fly by the seat of your pants, and move on to the next scenario.



Wik: Fable of Souls

Picture Lemmings crossed with Lord of the Rings and you'll start to get an idea of what Fable of Souls is all about. The game snagged the grand prize at the 2005 Independent Games Festival on the strength of unique fairytale graphics, cool physics and a very weird premise. The frog-like hero, Wik, jumps, swings and spits his way through each level by snagging little green grubs and feeding them to a creature called the Slotham before it lumbers off the screen. There's actually a story in there too, believe it or not.



By Erin Bell

ASUS recommends Microsoft® Windows® XP

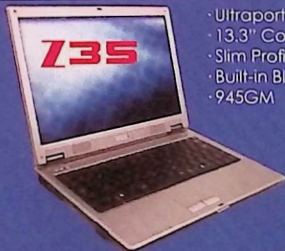
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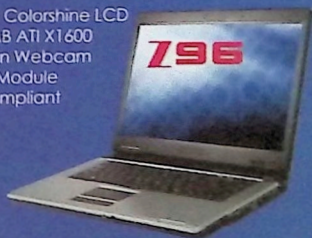
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